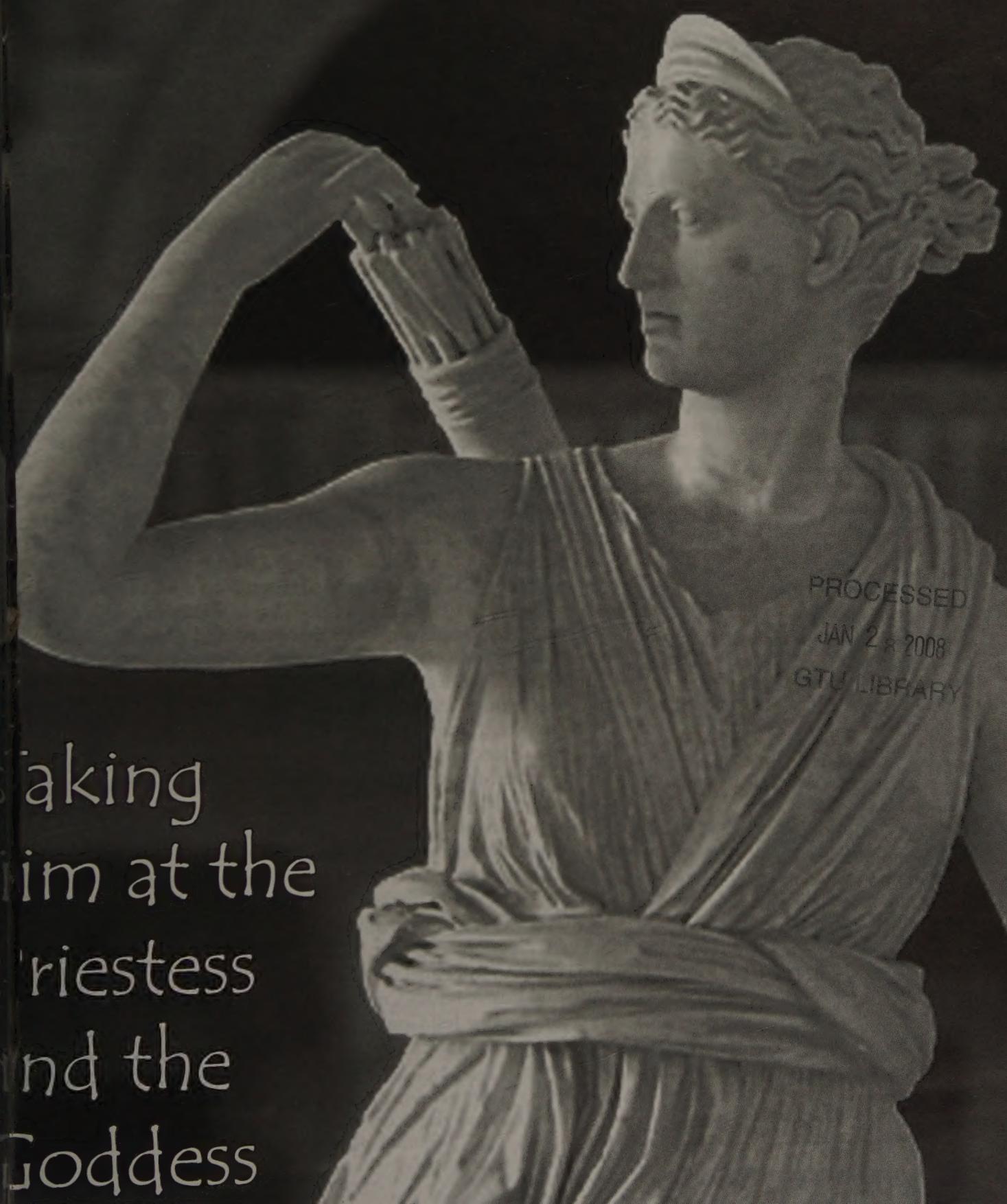




The INQUIRER

65p

The voice of British and Irish Unitarians and Free Christians Issue 7690 January 26, 2008



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The INQUIRER

THE UNITARIAN AND FREE CHRISTIAN PAPER

Established 1842

The Inquirer is the oldest
Nonconformist religious newspaper

**"To promote a free and inquiring
religion through the worship of
God and the celebration of life; the
service of humanity and respect for
all creation; and the upholding of the
liberal Christian tradition."**

*From the Object passed at the
General Assembly of the Unitarian and
Free Christian Churches 2001*

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Inquiring Words

Stand and silently watch the world go by—and it will.

—Anonymous

Social Responsibility Officer is needed

Frustration at the apparent lack of priority being given to the appointment of a new Social Responsibility Officer has led Bruce Chilton, chair of the General Assembly's Penal Affairs Panel, to write to members of the Executive Committee and to the Chief Executive, the Rev Steve Dick, to express 'extreme concern' on behalf of the Panel.

At the Panel's meeting on 7 January, Kate Taylor reported that she had raised the question of a fresh appointment with Peter Soulsby and the Reverend Ann Peart at the GA Road Show event in Birmingham the previous Saturday, only to learn that there were no plans to replace the last Social Responsibility Officer, Ingrid Tavkar, and that work in the Social Responsibility field was simply held to be the responsibility of individual congregations.

Bruce points out that Unitarians have a history of social responsibility, action and service. He refers to the General Assembly object of 2001 'to promote a free and inquiring religion through...the service of humanity' and adds that a large number of present-day Unitarians pursue religious inquiry through such service.

In the past, the Social Responsibility Officer has acted as a catalyst, prompting member congregations to become involved in social action in many spheres. The officer has forged links, on behalf of the Movement, with many bodies engaged in aspects of social welfare.

'The appointment need not be full time,' says Bruce, 'but we do need someone who, amongst other things, can be the spokesperson for the Movement on issues of social responsibility where the press is concerned and to other bodies such as the Government and to represent the movement at relevant meetings and events'.

The Penal Affairs Panel is linked to the General Assembly's Faith and Public Issues Commission and Bruce has written to its chair, the Rev Jeff Gould, to ask that the Commission itself presses for the appointment which he considers vital.

—Kate Taylor

Feminine and the divine

Roles of the Priestess and the Goddess

By Maud Robinson

A couple of weeks ago, I mentioned my intended topic to one of the congregation's managing committee members; his immediate reaction was "Oh no, I'm staying away from that one, we're going to be bashed again, we're going to be told that any gentle and generous parts of our nature are down to the feminine within us and any aggressive and unsympathetic characteristics are down to our masculine nature."

I hope that is not what comes across in this piece – I have no intention of bashing men.

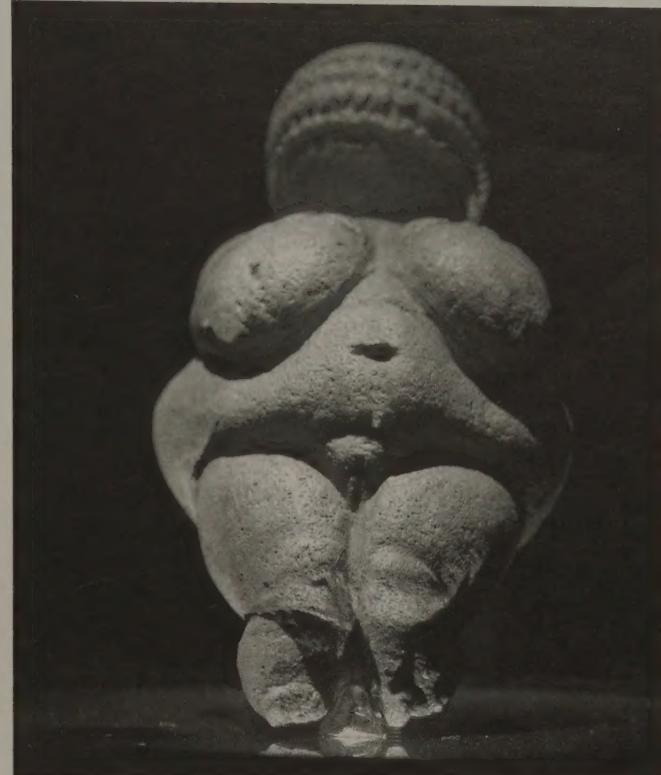
We went on to discuss the politically correct feminisation of language and how this "PC" overhaul can be accomplished, while the ethos of an organisation remains deeply prejudiced against women. In contrast, this church welcomes any member who is willing to put in the work, conduct a service and share their own ideas and approaches to worship with the rest of the congregation or become involved in any other area of church life. I certainly felt welcome to do this; within a year of becoming a regular member of the Dublin congregation I had joined the lay-preachers course run by the Minister, shortly afterwards I became a member of the Managing Committee and then trained as a Unitarian Minister at Manchester College Oxford, which, I was pleased to learn, accepted its first female candidate for the Nonconformist ministry in 1907.

Looking at all of these facts, you might say, isn't it obvious that women are held as being absolutely equal with men in the eyes of this denomination and this congregation? This is so, and just as it should be, and shouldn't really be any great cause for comment. So, what am I doing devoting a sermon solely to the issue of exploring the place of the priestess and the goddess in our worship?

Actually, as an aside the whole notion of a priestly caste within a spiritual community is anathema to most Unitarians, who hold that each individual is equally responsible for their own spiritual quest. A minister's task is to act as a facilitator in the spiritual questing of the congregation and not as a sacramentally anointed person set apart from the rest of the community. So the title of my address is a bit of a misnomer but "The Priestess and the Goddess" just somehow had a better ring to it than "The Female Minister and the Goddess".

Back to what I'm doing devoting a service to the issue of the feminine in our worship. Many of us, by heritage, hail originally from Catholic or other spiritual communities, where it is still unheard of for women to hold any sort of roles of power. For those of us who came to Unitarianism as adults with a history behind us in other religious traditions, no matter how much we have intellectually discarded the ideas of those other religious traditions, there is no doubt that for many of us they are a deep part of our personal history. We cannot so easily slough off the things which were part of our formation from our earliest years.

We are a product of our collective history, in which there is a broadly documented history of patriarchy within all Christian churches. However, there is also a largely forgotten part of that history in which women were held in higher esteem spiritually and intellectually. In her book "The Serpent and the Goddess", Mary Condren writes, "Women had largely been written out of history but traces remained. On finding in "The



The Venus of Willendorf was discovered in 1908 by at a Paleolithic site near Willendorf, a village in Lower Austria. It is thought to be one of the earliest representations of a female deity, estimated to have been carved 24,000–22,000 BCE.

Photo by Matthias Kabel

Lives of the Saints" such scraps of texts as, 'The women went to Saint B to study theology' I trembled both with delight and anger. Women had had a different past; they had studied theology; yet for hundreds of years in recent history, they no longer studied theology."

Because our recent history has been dominated by patriarchy, women have to be pro-active in re-asserting their power within their spiritual communities – power, which can be gentle and life-affirming and is not about self-aggrandisement or setting one person above another.

I think that one of the solutions to the historical omission of women's voices from religious thought is to actively foster the use of new and older but neglected texts by and about women. However, in doing so, I think it is important to maintain a balance between male and female both in participation and in language.

In Lucinda Vardey's book "The Flowering of the Soul", she identifies five 'key virtues shared by women who pray' virtues, which she states 'by their very nature, are uniquely feminine'. These virtues she lists as relatedness, perceptiveness, unity, dedication and care. While I admire her book and find a lot of what she says true for me and helpful in my questing to find my own way of relating to the divine, I would be extremely wary of describing such traits as being uniquely feminine. While it may be true that more women than men in general exercise these traits, there is no doubt that there are men who are caring, perceptive etc., and I think it is unhelpful to describe

(Continued on next page)

Gender imagery brings divine closer

(Continued from previous page)

them as feminine rather than masculine. Isn't it more positive to accept human beings along a continuum, with all shades of sensitivity and practicality along that continuum, appreciating the varied gifts and allowing for the varied weaknesses of all people, without reference to their gender?

However, it is interesting to ask, "Is there something which I as a woman can bring to worship that a male minister cannot?" This question I pondered long and hard and it's a difficult one. Is the kind of service, which I conduct inherently different from the kind of service conducted by a male minister or preacher? A service conducted by three men explored the Presbyterian roots of our denomination in a very factual way. This was very interesting and I think it's important that we spend time considering the history which has shaped the liberal religion, which we enjoy today. However, I can't see myself delivering a service of that type very often. I suppose I am more interested in what motivates individuals rather than in broad historical movements and maybe that is a feminine rather than a masculine approach. Is my approach of value because I can allow myself to be less intellectual and more emotional? I don't know the answer to these questions it's all just part of the exploration which we take part in together.

The original impetus to write this address came when listening to Bill Darlison's two addresses entitled "Honouring the Gods". I don't want to take issue with the ideas which Bill talked about in these services, but the very title gave me pause for thought. Why honouring the Gods and not the Goddesses? As Bill stated, "both the Jewish and the Christian Gods are male – at least in our psyche we perceive them as male". There is no doubt about this. The God of the Christian faith to which the Unitarian movement is still aligned is male. How can we reconcile this with being a liberal religion committed to inclusivity?

God does not have a gender and although we can readily accept that intellectually, we should be aware that many of us have a deep history of the use of male-centred language in prayer and that it is embedded in our collective psyche. The word God, in itself, causes me problems; it is a word which, despite our modern sophistication and political correctness, can't but conjure up images of a male godhead for many of us. How can we escape from these deeply ingrained images of a male godhead?

There are some that reject the use of anthropomorphic imagery of god at all and I am certainly not suggesting an acceptance of God as actually being male or female, however the notion of God is so completely beyond the ability of our intellects and language to grasp that sometimes the only way to approach God is through imagery. We could use completely gender-neutral language all of the time but this can leave God in the realm of an indescribable concept and as cold and unapproachable.

For many of us, in order to approach God in our very human and imperfect way, the use of some kind of imagery is helpful, so long as there is an acceptance that this use of imagery is simply a device by which we can use language to try to describe a concept which is beyond language.

I am not comfortable with meddling with the language of our traditional prayers and hymns in a lot of cases. For exam-

It is interesting to ask, "Is there something which I, as a woman, can bring to worship that a male minister cannot?"

ple, I am deeply attached to Psalm 23 – "The Lord is my Shepherd" it's part of my history and I find it deeply comforting and strengthening in times of fear or uncertainty. In principle, I have no problem with male imagery of God but it has to be balanced with an equally powerful imagery of God as female.

My aunt was an active member of an ashram in London for many years. I haven't talked to her in great depth about the particular beliefs of the ashram but, having distanced herself from the institutions of her original religious community, she still uses the spiritual practices which she learned there, including prayer and meditation. I was very struck by the fact that, in times of uncertainty or petition, she makes offering of flowers and incense to the Goddess, I'm not sure which Goddess in the Indian pantheon or if she makes offering to more than one but this is not important. What is important is the experience that, as a woman and as a mother, she can come to the Goddess and relate to the Goddess about the deepest things in her life, which she probably could not do in the same way to a male image God. This is an experiential and not an intellectual exercise.

I want to share with you some of her own words about her experience of the Goddess – she wrote:

*I really believe nothing
Except that belief is not required.
Only experience counts.*

*So after the incense
And the little gift of flowers
Somehow I notice, I experience,
Deep, far away, like a glimmer within,
A tiny sense of having come home.
I do experience this.
Fortunately, I have no need to account for it.*

More and more the experiential aspect of spirituality is of greater importance to me than the intellectual aspect and any methods I can find which help me to deepen that experience I hold to be of value. For me, at the place where I am on my spiritual path right now, using female imagery is helping to deepen my exploration and I commend it to you as a small stepping-stone along the path towards spiritual depth.

Our congregation benefits from a coming together of male and female, practical and spiritual. I have presented a view centred on an image of God as feminine, as a mother; probably next week you will probably hear something completely different and this is our strength.

The Rev Maud Robinson is student minister with First Parish (Unitarian Universalist) in Bedford, Massachusetts, USA. This piece is an excerpt of an address she gave at the Dublin Unitarian Church

GA Roadshow rolled into Birmingham

By Kate Taylor

Some 25 of us shivered but were, I think, at least quite heart warmed, when Executive Committee Convener Peter Soulsby and member the Rev Ann Peart talked to us and answered questions at New Meeting, Birmingham, on the first Saturday of January.

Introducing the day, Peter and Ann spoke of looking towards the Annual Meeting in March, when growth will be a central theme. The Executive Committee has been preparing the ground, but now the seeds must be sown. But what growth and how? Numerically? Spiritually? Financially? All of these, it seemed. But how, with a shortage of money and ministers, could new congregations be established?

Ploughing has included strategies for improving communications, and establishing the new Partnership Support and future ministry panels. Then there is the development of the consistent identity, now available for congregations to adopt. Congregations have been offered grants to improve their notice boards, in line with the consistent identity. The GA website is being transformed. The handbook, *Help is at Hand*, has been created. We have an able and committed youth officer. The GA Constitution is to be tidied up. No doubt, we shall hear more of the Radical Hospitality Project ...

The importance of District Associations as catalysts and critics was emphasised. Unkempt and unwelcoming chapels might be gently encouraged to change!

Questions and discussion focused on room for improvement. There was scope for much more development of the (increasingly important) GA website. GA Publicity might be targeted



Executive Committee Members Ann Peart and Peter Soulsby answered questions at the Birmingham Roadshow. Photo by Kate Taylor

at schools and universities. It would be good if far more people could be persuaded to attend the General Assembly meetings, if the programme could be finalised much earlier, and if the cost could be substantially reduced. Individual Unitarians and Free Christians might be encouraged to acquire a greater 'district consciousness' rather than being simply devoted to their own congregations.

But at least those of us who were at New Meeting came with a degree of 'GA consciousness' and left with a little more understanding.

Kate Taylor is a member at Wakefield.

UHS plans conference

By Kate Taylor

In a new venture, the Unitarian Historical Society (UHS) is mounting a one-day conference on aspects of Unitarian History on Saturday 26 April at Westgate Chapel, Wakefield.

The event, which is restricted to 25 participants, will include the opportunity to look in the 18th-century catacombs beneath the chapel and to visit the unique John Goodchild Collection which is housed nearby.

Three of Unitarianism's most distinguished historians will provide the talks. John Goodchild is to speak on 'The workings of the Chapel', considering the 18th and 19th centuries, in particular. Aspects will include the financing of chapels, the social status of their members, and their officers. He will consider the impact of Protestant Dissenters on their local communities as they pioneered non-sectarian education, and the provision of libraries and hospitals. He will also look at the day-to-day running of chapels including such things as heating and lighting as well as the establishment of Sunday Schools.

The Reverend Andrew Hill is to talk about Yorkshire General Baptists, and the Rev Dr Ann Peart will speak about the Unitarian College Collection.

There is a charge of £2 for the day to cover tea, coffee and biscuits. Those attending are asked to bring their own lunch.

Inquiries and bookings to Kate Taylor, 19 Pinder's Grove, Wakefield, WF1 4AH, Tel 01924-372748 or e-mail kate@airtime.co.uk

HEARING YOUNG VOICES IN WORSHIP

Saturday 23 February 10.30 am - 4pm at Westgate Chapel, Wakefield

A workshop exploring how we can encourage greater involvement of children and young people in worship, led by the GA Youth Officer, the Rev John Harley.

Bring your own food but hot drinks will be available all day.

All welcome but it would be appreciated if people who are not members of the Yorkshire Unitarian Lay Preachers' Association could let Kate Taylor know (01924-372748, or kate@airtime.co.uk) if they plan to attend.

Westgate Chapel is next to the mainline Westgate Station.

Khasi Hills Unitarians Ipswich supports Shillong school



David Forsdyke shows children at the Shillong School how his camera works.

By Riena Jackson

The Sunderland Memorial School in Shillong, in north-east India's Khasi Hills, was recently the subject of a wonderful presentation at the Ipswich Unitarian Meeting House, given by Tessa and David Forsdyke. Tessa and David, who are members of the Ipswich congregation, have recently returned from Shillong, where they visited the school and met the children, teachers and management committee. The video they made was greatly enjoyed by the members and friends who gathered on the evening of 7 December.

Ipswich Unitarians have a special link with this school, which was founded by the Rev Margaret Barr in 1941. Margaret Barr was very specific that the school, although a Unitarian foundation, should be non-sectarian (unlike most of the schools in Shillong, which are run by other churches) and be open to children from all backgrounds. The school also has a long record of catering for the 'poorest of the poor'. Most of the children have to do some sort of work after their day at school to help support their families.

Two years ago, the Unitarian minister in Shillong, Pearl Greene Marbaniang, who is a member of the school's Management Committee, approached the Ipswich congregation about the possibility of financial help for such things as English classes for the youngest children in the school. The Ipswich congregation wholeheartedly and enthusiastically undertook to help support

Graduate of Margaret Barr's school

By John Hewardine

I recently had the privilege of hosting one of Margaret Barr's old pupils who has just paid his first visit to the UK. When I first met him, Khlur was a small boy in Kong Barr's village primary school in that remote part of Northern of India. He was about 5 and the baby sister he carried on his back was 2 or 3. Khlur Mukhim is the son of Kyiek and Dranwell, both vital people in the day-to-day life of Margaret Barr, when we first met in the 60s. Dran would drive the jeep and do all manner of odd jobs around the school and orphanage, as well as helping his wife Kyiek at the health clinic. Kyiek trained as a midwife in the 1950's and ran the Health Centre for Margaret Barr. As a true devotee of Margaret Barr, Kyiek still continues this work even today.

I have returned to the Khasi & Jaintia Hills of Meghalaya, North Eastern India many times since my first encounter with the Mukhim family in 1968. They have always given me a warm welcome and hospitality second to none. Over the years, I have become part of their extended family. When their son Khlur was finally able to visit the UK at the end of 2007, it was a very special time for me and my family.

Khlur Mukhim arrived in good time for the New Year and the first week of 2008. I made sure that he was in the North of

'When I first met him, Khlur was a small boy in Kong Barr's village primary school in that remote part of Northern of India.'

England for our celebrations, including a "hinge of the year" service at Old Chapel, Great Hucklow in Derbyshire and an introduction to "first footing" at our family home across the Lancashire border. It is now some time since my once black hair turned grey and then to white. Khlur has a good head of jet black hair and was a most eligible candidate to be first across the threshold, after partying with us all at our next-door neighbour's home.

Apart from a night or two staying with other family members and a couple of nights with a friend in London, we also managed a night at the Nightingale Centre in Great Hucklow. We were the only three people there! This was quite a contrast from the week before when Dot and I had stayed there for a wedding and the place was full.

In Manchester, visits included Luther King House, the Central Library and the Royal Exchange building. We also attended Cross Street Chapel for a mid-week service taken by the Rev John Midgley.

and seeks help

the school for five years with a minimum annual grant. The money is raised with pledged donations, concerts and other events, and a weekly 'Bits and Bobs' stall during coffee-time after service. The money is being used to pay for two teachers; for school uniforms, furniture and books; and for swings and other equipment. In Tessa and David's film, the congregation saw – and heard – the beautifully turned-out children in class, singing enthusiastically and answering questions (in English!), and outside playing on the swings!

Recently, Pearl Greene approached our congregation once more. In order to survive in the long term, it is necessary for the school to extend its teaching to high school level. This is crucial for maintaining and raising the number of children entering the secondary level class and preparing them for further education. A sum of £3000 per annum is required for this project, an amount that the Ipswich congregation is not able to provide on their own. So we, the Ipswich Unitarians, are looking for one or more congregations who would like to join with us in a shared commitment to raise £3000 on an annual basis over an agreed period. The money will benefit the Sunderland School and also, judging by the experience of the Ipswich Unitarian Meeting, do wonders for the life of the donor congregations.

For further information please contact: Riena Jackson,
Ipswich Unitarian Meeting House, Friars Street, Ipswich IP1
ITD e-mail: mjack76748@aol.com.

ours Unitarian sites



Khlur Mukhim, (centre) a Unitarian from the Khasi Hills toured Britain at New Year. He is shown here signing the visitor's book at Cross Street Chapel, Manchester with the Revs John and Celia Midgley. John is minister at Cross Street and Celia is our General Assembly president.

Trying to see the forest for the tree

By Art Lester

A Unitarian was clearing brambles from his big garden. The day was hot and sweat got into his eyes so that he couldn't see very well. He swung his chainsaw and accidentally sawed through the trunk of a lovely walnut tree.

As you know, walnut trees take a long time to grow. It takes at least 10 years to get the first few little walnuts and then many more to have a large shady tree. This tree had just given its first crop of nuts. The man felt so bad about having cut down the tree that he determined to unchop it. From that time, he devoted all his spare time to the project.

First he collected all the branches that had broken when the tree hit the ground. There were many of these, and he spent hours matching the splintered pieces and then carefully gluing them back into place. Then something awful happened: the leaves all began to turn brown and fall off. He carefully glued each one back in place and spent days mixing paints to get the exactly right colour of green, then re-painted them. This part of the project took a long time.

Months, then years passed. He worked constantly. Sometimes he worked so hard that he forgot to go to work, and the bills began to pile up. Sometimes he worked so hard that he forgot to eat, and he grew thin. Sometimes he forgot to sleep, and he went around with his eyes half closed.

Re-attaching the trunk was very tricky. He had to pull the roots completely out of the ground to do this. He spent a very long time getting the rings to match exactly before he glued it in place.

The next problem was the roots that had been torn out of the ground. He had to re-dig holes in the exact shape that would fit the roots. As the roots began to dry out, he rubbed expensive oils into the wood. Finally he stopped going to his job altogether, and just devoted himself to unchopping the tree.

At last the tree was ready to be hoisted back into place. It was far too heavy for the man, who had grown weak through not eating and not sleeping. With the last of his savings, he hired a crane and some men to help him. Over several days, he rigged a harness that wouldn't hurt the tender bark of the tree and attached a strong chain to it.

The crane arrived and the man had to knock down a section of his fence so that the machine could get into his garden. He held the chain carefully up toward the arm of the crane, but one of the men said, "Sorry, Guv – I can't get close enough." He pointed to where a young walnut tree had grown up during all the years of the man's labours. It was just at the point of bearing fruit.

"Don't worry," said the man. "I'll go and get my chainsaw."

The Rev Art Lester, minister at Croydon, will preach at the Anniversary Service at this year's General Assembly Meetings

Constitutional changes spelt out

A document detailing changes to our GA constitution to be proposed by the Executive Committee (EC) at the Annual Meetings in March, has been sent to all congregations. The two chief proposals were briefly outlined in the last GA News Page in *The Inquirer* (15/12/07) – for a phased election system for the EC, and for all our worshipping communities to be described as ‘congregations’.

The details reveal aspects that would – if approved – have a significant impact on many congregations. For example, at the moment a congregation needs 50 or more members before it can send TWO delegates to represent it at the Annual Meetings. But under the latest proposals, a congregation with 30 or more members would be entitled to send two delegates.

Also, Motions submitted to the Annual Meetings by congregations and most other bodies at present require approval from the full congregation or group. It is now proposed that only the governing body of these groups needs to approve a Motion.

The Executive is hoping to move from the current system of EC elections, where all eight members are elected together every three years, to a system where members serve four-year terms, with elections every two years – for half the posts.

A transitional arrangement is planned when the ballot is held towards the end of this year, which would see eight members elected for a four-year term. But of these eight, four would stand down after two years. The proposal states that, to enable this to take place, the Executive Committee would, after the elections, decide ‘by whatever means it considered appropriate’ which four of its members would serve for four years and which four would retire, or seek re-election, after two years. (The details would be announced).

The Executive will make nominations at the Annual Meetings for the Electoral Panel (which will organise the elections) – the Executive has decided to nominate Alan Ruston as the Panel Chair, and two others to be selected.

(On the constitutional proposals, it is important to note that the EC is also suggesting changes to the GA By-laws. The current By-laws could formerly be modified by the GA Council, and they largely contained its operating practices. The proposed new By-laws require the approval of the Annual Meetings for changes to be made – and they now include criteria for congregational membership that were formerly in the GA Handbook.)

Vice President and GA Anniversary Service

The Rev Bob Wightman has been nominated by the Executive Committee to serve as Vice-President of the General Assembly for 2008/9. This means he would serve as GA President for 2009/10. Bob is a member of the Executive Committee and has served as Minister to the Dundee congregation since 1999. He has had a high media presence over many years, both locally on Tayside and as a contributor to ‘Pause for Thought’ on the Terry Wogan show on Radio 2.

The Rev Art Lester, who is Minister at Croydon Unitarian Church, will be the Preacher at the GA Anniversary Service on Friday 28 March at the 2008 Annual Meetings in Hatfield. The Anniversary Service is to be conducted by the Rev Jane Barracough, who is currently Minister at Bethnal Green in London and who is shortly to become Minister at Cross Street Chapel, Manchester.

Have you booked for Growth Day?

The full timetable for the General Assembly Annual Meetings was sent out to congregations last month. The GA is keen to encourage as many members (and friends) as possible to come along for all or part of the Meetings in Hatfield, which run from Wednesday 26 to Saturday 29 March. Please remember that all bookings (with fee) must reach Essex Hall by 31 January! – otherwise a late fee of £50 will apply.

Members are being encouraged to make a particular effort to attend Growth Day on Friday 28 March. The first full session devoted to growth begins at 1045 (after coffee and a business meeting) and continues until 1530, and then tea until 1610. After that there are a series of events to choose from: a Consultation on the forthcoming EC Elections, the Associate Members Reception, and open meetings of the Worship Panel, the Earth Spirit Network and the Unitarian Renewal Group among others.

The cost of attending for one day will be £65, and this will include lunch and teas. Those attending Growth Day will be welcome to attend the Anniversary Service that Friday night (from 1930), but unfortunately not dinner beforehand (because of the arrangements we have with the host campus).

Road Shows draw to an end

Attendance at the GA Road Shows has picked up in recent months, with the last two – in London and Birmingham – being particularly well-attended. As with all of these events, there was wide-ranging discussion with the Executive Committee members present. Now the initial series of Road Shows are coming to an end, with the penultimate one being held in Dundee this Saturday (26 January). The final one – at the Tabernacle Chapel, Waterloo Terrace, at Carmarthen in Wales -- will be held on Saturday 2 February, starting at 12 noon.

Note from the Chief Executive

“This month Jim Corrigall finishes his work as Communications Consultant and moves on to other pursuits. I wish to publicly acknowledge his positive contribution to the work of the General Assembly. I am personally grateful for his assistance during the past year and I look forward to continuing to work with Jim as a committed Unitarian and as the chair of our Golders Green congregation.” – Steve Dick.

This page was compiled by Jim Corrigall in his capacity as Communications Consultant to the General Assembly – in consultation with the chief executive.

Finding 'church' in the wilderness

By James Barry

Pound, pound, pound, my legs continued, mechanically, mindless, rhythmic. Pound, pound, pound, over 2 million now, the gluttony of time made the calculation easy. For while my legs laboured, my head was left with nothing but navigational checks and, even rarer, a decision. Which crossroad was I at? When did I stop for the night? Where did I stop for the night? Small thoughts that punctuated hours of vacuum. Monitoring the ever-changing view was the other task, oh so slowly, but changing, pound, pound, pound.

For a moment my legs did stop, an allowable pause. A junction, my head awoke, but this only required the topmost layer, other thoughts would not normally be broken by such a mundane event. But it was on this occasion, I was off the map, a significant milestone. I pulled from my raging loneliness and removed my gloves, in itself a painful operation. My hands constantly suffering from arteries constricted by tight rucksack straps and the bulky winter clothing. The map fell to its full length. Now there were only four left, just four pages to go, almost touchable, taking Cornwall now even further away. I remembered when the idea to 'go the pretty way' seemed fun and exciting, now it was a sour joke. I re-folded the map as the low ambient temperature froze out my remaining dexterity and kicked forward.

A lonely uncomplicated farm pierced the mist, or was it rain? Dull corrugated iron shelters surrounded an old Land Rover and a small poorly lit dwelling. A small silent stand against sensibility. It did not notice me as I continued up yet another hill. I had such little left, once an incline was the opportunity for a good view, now it was just an increase in pain and a reduction in the rate of the change. The map showed the farm and little way beyond, a cross was marked, a church maybe? More likely a chapel up here. A few minutes later, as the road flattened, a subtle change on grey was the first indication of the likely building. As the detail increased, it looked more agricultural than a place of worship. A simpler construction would not have been possible, four walls and a dripping apex roof still fully intact. The doors and windows now just holes in the stonework. My pack was left sitting less the head torch. Although tired, my body still rejoiced each time it escaped from the payload, my stiff gait adjusting quickly to the change in my centre of gravity and reduced weight. Sheep had claimed the ground floor, but the light caught a staircase, solid, clean, and importantly not rotten. It revealed a clear wooden upper floor. The rucksack seemed twice the poundage, and once upstairs, its contents were soon sprawled across the boards, expanding well beyond the normal three-foot confines of the tent walls.

That night I had no worries of wind fighting with stretching tent pegs, inquisitive animals or people, penetrating rain or cold. There, I just passed out on a warm flat floor with the luxury of space and of being inconspicuous.

I was used to waking to daylight of course, a simple sign that it was time to start packing again. But before this, normally six, eight, 12 times I would lose my sleep to something, somebody, but usually nothing. Yes, daylight I was used too, but silence or sunshine I was not. I wormed across the floor to the window hole; as I did, there was not the normal painful complaints from each limb, the pins and needles from lumpy stony ground, the stiffness, not today, after just one good night's sleep, they moved freely. I pulled up to the ledge, my



James Barry of Ditchling on his walk from Land's End to John O'Groats.

heart stopped, cocooned in the protection of my sleeping bag and stonewalls, yes my heart stopped. I had been fighting this miserable country for weeks and, for the first time, it gave in. Be calmed, its beauty opened for me at last. Overnight rain, my normal early morning curse, lifted away in warming wisps that danced down the valley. Glossed green shades, not greys, hit me – pricked by happy sheep and the brown of bark. The sky lit its world, it did not drown and darken its territory. A second valley telescoped away back towards the Cairngorms. My window, just one pace across, enlightened me more than any number of steps over that last few weeks. Nature was showing me her peace, all I had seen so far had been its supremacy. Now I could see why farmers hide for so long behind those iron sheets hit by the weather for weeks at a time. There was a reason for the suffering.

The morning cooking task was an unusual joy, interrupted by ever increasing returns to my window to check the vision. I remembered the cross on the map, the chapel, was this it? It didn't fit, more a farm, but with this one window I wanted to believe. Had somebody, a hundred years ago, built this altar to honour such perfection? To thank, to pray, to feel, so dwarfed so humble. I absorbed its strength, I sheltered, I felt, I cried.

A different person started walking that day and a few hundred yards up the road in a damp enclosure, I found a chapel. Somebody else's chapel. It didn't seem to have the qualities of mine, the sustenance, the power. I passed it and as I continued, somehow again my feet became part of me, a whole me.

James Barry is a member at Ditchling. He wrote this about a Land's End to John O'Groats walk he completed in 1980.

Letters to the Editor

What brought this newcomer to Unitarianism

To the Editor:

I know nothing of those people who have made contact with the Unitarians via the website (Peter Witham's letter in *The Inquirer* on 1 December), but, as a relatively new member, I can relate what first attracted me to the movement, although I expect my experience is far from unusual.

I attended an uncle's funeral in Shrewsbury where I was impressed by a funeral oration that was completely free of the cant and platitudes that usually accompany such an event. After enquiring of the person who conducted the service (his sense of modesty prevents me from mentioning his name), I discovered to my great surprise that there was a Unitarian church not far away from us in Kidderminster. Here I contacted the minister, Ann Latham, and the rest, as they say, is history.

In this splendidly led church, both my wife and I have found like-minded people, who – true to the Unitarian tradition – are loving, tolerant, outward-looking and socially committed. It may be an ageing and small congregation but their beliefs and attitudes are those that we have been vainly seeking to share for very many years. I now feel ashamed that I knew nothing of the Unitarian movement until I had almost reached the grand old age of 70!

Graham Williams

Alveley

Some library problems may be solved

To the Editor:

Re Unitarian College Library

Len Smith is quite right about the poor conditions of the Dixon store, where the John Rylands University Library of Manchester keeps the Unitarian College Collection post-1800 books and pamphlets. So Len will be pleased to learn of a meeting which Principal Ann Peart and I had with Judith Shields (religious and theological collections) and Paul Holder (stock controller) of the library staff. Two things emerged from this meeting:

1. That the whole of the Unitarian College Collection (apart from the

manuscripts) is now accessible through the university library's on-line catalogue. This gives the collection a distinct advantage over the Unitarian collections at Harris Manchester College, Oxford and at Dr. Williams's Library London, which are not so accessible. We now know that there are almost 19,000 post-1800 items in the Dixon Store and over 4,000 pre-1800 items in the special collections at Deansgate. The manuscripts remain uncatalogued.

2. That there is a distinct possibility for the post-1800 material to be moved from the Dixon store to available space in the basement of the main library building. This is an opportunity too good to be missed but is conditional on some reduction in the collection's size. Since there are many items which are outside the core Unitarian subjects (e.g. several years of Commonwealth Universities Year Books), some reduction is possible but it is specialist work. Following the end of the College session, Ann Peart and I are committed to this task and maybe Len would like to join us.

I hold no brief for the Memorial Hall Trustees but if they were to increase their grant to the College, as college president I would be delighted to write a special 'thank you' letter.

Andrew M. Hill

President, Unitarian College
Manchester

Roots of anti-Semitism are deep and intertwined

To the Editor:

Amongst readers of *The Inquirer*, I suspect I am not alone in having spent many years in beating my post-colonial breast. I also suspect that I am not alone in having sought out the absurd and iniquitous in Christian history.

In the second part of his important essay on the future of Unitarianism, Vernon Marshall says that, "The wearing of a badge to distinguish someone as a Jew and the creation of the Ghetto were both creations ... of medieval Christian church councils."

I do not think that is quite right.

It was while looking at our disgusting Western tradition of anti-Semitism that I came across the following paragraphs: "Another law designed to humiliate

dhimmis [non-Muslims under Muslim jurisdiction] required them to wear different clothing. The purpose of this law was to enable Muslims to recognise Jews and Christians at all times, and to make them appear foolish. In 807, the Abbasid Caliph Haroun al-Raschid, legislated that Jews must wear a yellow belt and a tall conical cap. This Muslim decree provided the model for the yellow badge associated with the degradation of Jews in Christian Europe and most recently imposed by the Nazis"

In the 11th century, "in Egypt, the Fatimid Caliph Hakim ordered Christians to wear a cross with arms two feet long, while Jews were ordered to wear around their necks balls weighing five pounds, to commemorate the calf's head that their ancestors had once worshipped." (*Why the Jews?*, Dennis Prager and Joseph Telushkin)

The Pact of Umar (c.717 CE), where it was first stated the dhimmis should not look like Muslims, can be read at this website, <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/pact-umar.html>.

As part of the Pact of Umar, dhimmis must agree that, "We shall clip the fronts of our heads. We shall always dress in the same way wherever we may be, and we shall bind the zunar round our waists." (A zunar is a wide belt.)

The concept of 'ghetto' is problematic; cities have always had their various quarters. Ancient Rome had a Jewish Quarter, as it had at one time, it seems, an Etruscan Quarter.

When is a quarter a ghetto? Some ghettos are formed through self-selecting settlement, some through prejudice, some through a blend of the two. As the Jewish Encyclopaedia puts it, "Although the ghettos owed their origin primarily to the intolerance and tyranny of the citizens, yet the Jews themselves must have found it undesirable to live scattered among a hostile population" We must not let our contemporary post-Nazi understanding of the word ("corrals – preliminary to extermination", Britannica), obscure its still ugly, yet less distinctly evil, origins. Neither must we let the supposition that the word 'ghetto' with its Venetian etymology allow us to think of this cruel device as a solely Christian phenomenon.

The Encyclopaedia Britannica cites
(Continued on next page)

USPS enjoyed a varied conference

By Hazel Reynolds

The Unitarian Society for Psychical Studies (USPS) had a really stimulating conference this past autumn. We had our usual AGM on Friday leaving Saturday free for our speakers. This attracts day visitors who may not be able to spare the time to come for the whole wonderful weekend.

Our first speaker, David Taylor, called his slide-enhanced address "Varieties of Ghostly Experience". He showed that people have been seeing apparitions for over 2000 years but, prior to the 17th century, most ghosts were of dead people personally known to the seer rather than the Roman soldiers medieval monks etc, frequently reported in more recent times. I am delighted to say that David intends to speak again at our conference in 2008 so please come along to see how he has the ability to bring ghosts alive!

There was a complete change of theme after coffee, when Irene Farrington discussed auras and chakras. She explained how we have various levels of consciousness such as the etheric, astral and spiritual levels, which can interact with each other. The aura produced around someone can be seen by sensitive people and it changes with the mood of that person.

After lunch, we enjoyed seeing a wedding blessing in the garden of the Nightingale Centre before hearing a hypnotherapist called John Swallow. He had the ability to get everyone present into an extremely relaxed state of mind. Some can easily go further into a hypnotic state. In this state people become susceptible to such things as healing phobias and fears. It is a wholly beneficial way of improving our quality of life as we do not have to absorb any ideas we do not wish to.

Our Sunday programme included a discussion on our future conferences. We also heard a DVD about how human embryos develop.

Letter —

(Continued from previous page)

Morocco as maybe having the first ghetto, in Arabic the word is 'millah': the Jewish Encyclopaedia suggests Prague.

Beyond this, two things must be stressed. In the Gospel of John, Jesus is reported as saying to the Jews, "You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires." (John 8:44) In the Qur'an, we read of some Jews as those "whom He has turned into apes and swine because they worshipped the powers of evil." (Leopold Weiss' translation, 5:66)

Apologists can argue that both these quotations have mitigating contexts, but as bald statements, supposedly from the Almighty, they have led, and still lead, to revolting consequences.

World views borrow from each other. I suggest that Islam took anti-Semitism from Christianity and Christianity later took some anti-Semitic practices from Islam.

Michael Bartlett

Isle of Lewis



Listening for Peace at Rochdale Unitarian Church

On Saturday 20 October, more than 50 people turned up to hear 'Listening for Peace' – a solo concert featuring Lauren Pelon, organised by the Unitarian Peace Fellowship. A talented and versatile musician, Pelon's message of peace and concern for the environment entertained and at times enchanted the Unitarian audience at Rochdale's Clover Street Church.

Her musical expertise extended through a whole range of songs and musical instruments that included penny whistle, eagle bone flute, guitar, lute guitar and concertina.

Her essential theme, through word and music is of 'listening': listening to one another in openness and mercy, listening to plants and animals in wonder and respect. Lauren's theme was a message also, to the inner self that requires a 'listening to our own hearts in love and forgiveness.' She said, "We do not ask for a perfect world, but we do ask for deep listening".

— Bob Pounder



Rob Rosso, an Italian Unitarian sent along this photo of a small congregation there, with greetings for British Unitarians.

News in brief



Leicester Unitarians in Lyddington! People from the Leicester Unitarian Fellowship met up with people from Leicester Great Meeting Chapel for a convivial evening together, including a sprinkling of friends and relatives. Phil and Ruth Archer kindly provided a delicious buffet meal for us all at their lovely house and garden in Lyddington, Rutland before we attended a concert at the local church, hosted by 'Music in Lyddington' (who organise concerts with musicians of international repute). We enjoyed listening to 'Les Haulz et Les Bas', playing 'loud' traditional music on their mediaeval musical instruments.

— Helen Pettman

Go in peace, speak the truth

Go in peace, speak the truth, give thanks each day.
Respect the earth and her creatures,
for they are alive like you.
Care for your body; it is a wondrous gift.
Live simply. Be of service.
Be guided by your faith and not your fear.
Go lightly on your path. Walk in a sacred manner.
Amen.

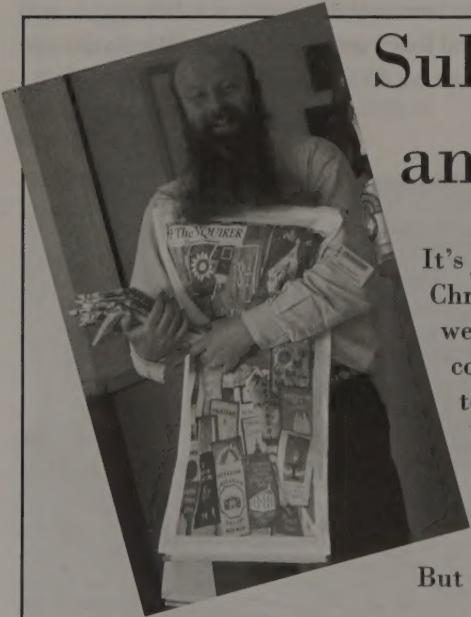
— Gary Kowalski

Sources for Unitarian family history

Alan Ruston had an article published on 'Tracing your Unitarian Ancestry' in the *Family History Monthly* for January 2008. This will be of interest to anyone faced with these enquiries. The article includes background on Presbyterian and Unitarian history, and references to periodicals, books and addresses. The article is one of a series on tracing non-conformist ancestors. Alan also wrote the articles on the Baptists and Congregationalists, and others covered Huguenots and Methodists. General information about the magazine will be found at: www.familyhistorymonthly.com There is also much useful information on the website of the Unitarian Historical Society: www.unitarianhistory.org.uk including sources for research and genealogy, and portraits of figures in Unitarian history and illustrations of some Unitarian meeting houses.

— Howard Hague

Subscribe to *The Inquirer* and get a free tea towel



It's just £24 a year, for the fortnightly news of the Unitarian and Free Christian movement, delivered to your door. And, it arrives on Thursday, well before you can get it at church. (Tea towels will also be sent to any congregations which increase their bundles.) Fill in the coupon and return to *The Inquirer*, c/o John Crosskey, Essex Hall, 1-6 Essex Street, London WC2R 3HY. Please enclose a cheque payable to *The Inquirer* for £24. For that you will receive a year's subscription to *The Inquirer* and a tea-towel — worth £5 — bearing a photograph of many congregations' banners. It's modelled, left, by James Barry, *Inquirer* board member. But you can use it to dry your cups.

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